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Teaching Jazz Guitar To The Freshman Student

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The student new to jazz faces many obstacles and I believe this is especially true for the student of jazz guitar. In my many years of private and group instruction, I have encountered students with a mixture of no experience, little experience, or a fair amount of prior instruction. Oftentimes, the student with no prior experience in learning to play the guitar, regardless of the specific genre of interest, has less problems adapting to the study of jazz. In contrast, the student with a moderate amount of prior self-study usually discovers that he or she has acquired improper physical techniques and most likely vague or simply incorrect information in regards to theory and the basic fundamentals of music in general. In this article I would like to share with the reader my experiences in teaching jazz guitar at the college level and the personal methodologies I employ to assist the new jazz student of guitar and electric jazz bass.

Breaking Bad Habits

Technology has an influence on learning and this influence can be negative. There are many questionable

Web sites offering so-called "instruction"; many are reputable while others offer advice that is either imprecise or altogether incorrect. All too often guitar students with a year or more of experience have learned to read guitar tablature only; this becomes a problem when reading standard notation becomes a necessity. There are video games such as Guitar Hero and Rock Band that are played with a virtual guitar that have little to do with the way a real guitar is played. With no disrespect to any specific teachers, there are students I have taught who have been given completely erroneous information in regards to various aspects of physical technique and music fundamentals. This of course creates difficulty for the new student of jazz who must relearn previously given incorrect information. I have actually taught students with several years of personal study who were not sure which string on the guitar was specifically the first numbered string. Others have been misled into believing that picking technique and control have little to do with a clear and articulate tone. Many incoming students even lack the ability to properly tune the instrument.

My approach to teaching jazz guitar is a result of decades of private and group instruction from very young to adult students. At the college level I have perfected my own approach which I believe to be clear, precise, and directly to the point. I have collected these approaches and include them in a booklet that I give to my students as a guide during the semesters of study. To my credit the students tell me that the book has helped them immensely. Having straightforward, logically presented materials is a definite aid in teaching the aspiring guitarist.

Twelve-Tone System

The first and typically most overlooked subject is the simple application of the twelve-tone system to the fingerboard. As my students acquire basic skills in their theory classes in pitch identification, sharps and flats, enharmonic equivalents, basic intervals, etc, this information is directly applied to the fingerboard. I employ two basic methods-lateral and longitudinal approaches to master the basic task of locating any note anywhere on the fingerboard. For the lateral approach I suggest the student visually divide the fingerboard into four fret quadrants: frets zero to four, frets five to eight, and frets nine through twelve. Each and every note must be located and accurately identified via this quadrant approach. The longitudinal approach requires the student to locate and identify all notes along each string individually. During these lessons I stress the importance of the number twelve and how octaves and first order harmonics are found on each string. I have determined that guitar students progress much more quickly when this task of fingerboard discovery is thoroughly mastered before any other material is presented. The ability to accurately and successfully locate any note on the fingerboard proves its immense worth in acquiring future skills with respect to intervals, chord voicings, note reading, and improvisation.

Introducing Chords, Scales

As the student progresses and gains confidence in his ability to definitively locate notes along the fingerboard it is now time to systematically introduce intervals, triads, seventh chords, extended and altered chords, and ultimately scales.

When the student has acquired the skills to locate notes, play seventh chords in all five families, and read simple melodies and rhythms it is appropriate to introduce a simple blues-based jazz tune such as "Freddie Freeloader" or "Mr. P.C.". This is where the importance of melody is discussed and stressed. I even have my bass students learn

the heads to the jazz tunes they are studying in order to better understand the structure and design of the composer's intentions when writing the tune. The order of study for any tune is: melody, chords, arpeggios of each chord, most-consonant scale for each chord, and ultimately chord-tone soloing. A jazz guitar student who has reached an appropriate level then learns to arrange the tune into a basic jazz chord-melody piece. All of the elements of fingerboard discovery are then implemented by the student, which leads to the total mastery of the instrument through years of dedicated and diligent practice and application.

Intro to Improv

My approach to improvisation is straightforward and thorough. Once the student has proven that for any given tune he can demonstrate the ability to play the melody, chords, and arpeggios, then it is appropriate to introduce the concept of chord-tone-only improvisation.

By restricting the possible melodic choices to the chord's component tones the student is then forced to navigate along the fingerboard, locate these component tones, and employ simply rhythmic devices to unify and compose melodic lines. I have found this approach to be extremely helpful to prove to the jazz guitar student that scales are learned in conjunction with chord tones; the point being that if you have found the chord's component tones you have then located four-sevenths of the associated scales. The next step is to stress the importance of chord function and how to identify the upper-structure triad and possible alterations to dominants, secondary structures, and substitutions. Once again the initial study and hard work involved in fretboard discovery pays off in confidence and accuracy when enjoying the greatest part of jazz-the freedom to improvise.

When the student reaches the level of acceptable chord-tone-only improvisation, I slowly introduce the concepts of altered and other possible colorful scales and modes and their basic application. I stress that the purpose of employing any particular scale against any specific chord is to result in varying levels of color and dissonance. The ultimate approach awaits-the "proof" of improvisation.

The most difficult but equally rewarding mantra of teaching improvisation is then presented: sing your lines. My definition of improvisation is melody at the speed of thought. When a student can demonstrate the ability to sing an acceptable jazz line and then realize that line on the fingerboard of their instrument that student then has the capacity to advance at an accelerated pace. I then discuss the impact upon jazz by players such as George Benson and his phenomenal ability to scat-play with his voice and his guitar. To me that is the absolute ultimate proof of instantaneous creation of melody. When this ability to sing and play great lines is achieved by the jazz student it then becomes clear to them that their reward is now in the music they can create with almost no limitations.

Into the Fray

Once the jazz guitar student has acquired all of these skills he or she is now prepared to join a jazz or jazz-rock ensemble. The time invested in serious practice and study will prove its worth when the immediate application of all of these essential skills occurs with every tune at every rehearsal. The skills acquired from studying fingerboard navigation, playing melodies, reading notes and rhythms, finding chord tones, and implementing improvisational techniques all play a part in the overall development and maturity of the modern jazz guitarist. For me the teacher, my reward lies in watching and hearing the cumulative progress of my students. I truly believe in the old saying, "give a lesson-get a lesson."

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